?What is Topical Exegesis

Exegetic Trends

It is an indisputable fact that with regard to the exegesis of the Qur'an there is a variety of views, and diverse methods are followed by every school of thought. This can be clearly observed with a careful study of the books of exegesis of the Qur'an.

Some commentators confine their attention to the literal aspect of the verses and explain the Qur'an from the viewpoint of its wording, its diction and its inimitable style.

Some others pay exclusive attention to the special features of its meaning and its contents and subjects.

There is a third group of the commentators who explain the verses of the Qur'an on the basis of traditions (Ahadith) or explain each verse by comparing it to some other verse or verses. In this connection they also draw in the reports handed down from the Holy Prophet and the infallible Imams, and in the absence of such reports, they refer to the exposition of the verses by the companions of the Holy Prophet and those who followed them.

Again there are some commentators who with a view to justify the position held by their particular school try to reconcile the Qur'an with the opinions of that school. Finally there are some commentators who are not attached to any particular school and try to derive the answers to their questions direct from the Qur'an. They judge the correctness or incorrectness of any opinion only on the basis of what the Qur'an says. They have no preconceived ideas of their own.

There are some other schools also, but we do not intend to dwell on them. All that we want to explain here is that on the whole there are two methods or two styles of the exegesis of the Qur'an which we would like to study.

One of these two styles may be called the "split" style and the other the "unified" or the topical style.

While commenting on the Qur'an in accordance with split style, the commentator arranges his commentary within the framework of the Qur'an according to the sequence of its verses. He divides the verses into sections and explains each section with the help of the tools available with him, such as the literal meaning of each verse and its reasonable connotation in the light of the relevant traditions and other verses of the Qur'an having a common concept or a common context. He makes every effort to pay full attention to these things in his commentary to bring out the correct meaning of each section of the verses.

Naturally when we speak of split exegesis, we mean the most advanced form of it, as available today, for exegesis has gradually developed from the simple explanation of a few verses to its present advanced form which covers the whole Qur'an.

The history of this style of exegesis goes back to the period of the companions of the Holy Prophet. In the beginning it consisted of a commentary on a few verses only, which sometimes included the explanation of the words also. With the passage of time a need was felt for the exegesis of the whole Qur'an. Accordingly in the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth century commentators like Ibn Majah, Tabari and others expounded the whole Qur'an and produced the most advanced models of split exegesis.

In the split style of exegesis foremost attention is paid to the literal meaning of the verses with a view to be able to understand the contents of the Qur'an. In the beginning it was quite simple to understand the meanings of the words, but it became difficult as the distance from the period of the revelation increased. Though knowledge and experience have advanced, as a result of historical events the situation has changed, and proportionately this type of exegesis also has become complicated. Ambiguity has surrounded the contents of many words and verses. This difficulty of understanding the meanings has led to the compilation of the most complex works on the commentary of the Qur'an as they exist today.

In these commentaries we find that the commentator expounds the Qur'an verse by verse from the beginning to the end, for there are so many verses which with the passage of time need explanation. Meanwhile many cases of supporting evidence have been traced. They are also explained by the commentator.

In this connection it may be mentioned that we do not mean to say that a commentator in the course of split exegesis does not refer to other connected verses or does not take a note of them for the purpose of understanding the meaning of the verses under study.

Reference to other relevant verses is a common and usual practice. Similarly a reference is made to the traditions and reports also.

Drawback of Split Exegesis

It is important to note that this reference is made with the sole purpose of knowing the literal meaning of the verse or a few verses under study. In this type of exegesis the commentator uses all possible means only to find out the literal meaning, and at one time he studies only a small section of the Qur'an. But with a consecutive study of each and every section of the Qur'an, he can on the whole acquire a fair degree of knowledge of the contents and the fine points of the whole Qur'an, though he does so only in a split and scattered form.

Anyhow, he cannot determine the view of the Qur'an in regard to every field of life in respect of which Qur'anic verses have been revealed. Scattered information is there, but no connecting link exists to coordinate this information and provide the view of the Qur'an with regard to each one of the various subjects and fields.

Thus in split exegesis enough attention is not paid to the coordination of the verses, though in certain cases their interrelation is explained.

Danger of Split Exegesis

It is regrettable that this incoherent style of split exegesis has led to many sectarian contradictions in Islamic society. Every group in order to win supporters to its doctrine, has interpreted the Qur'anic verses according to its own sectarian views, as it has been the case with the supporters of many scholastic doctrines, such as the doctrines of predetermination, discretion and volition. Had these commentators taken just one step further, and looked a little beyond the few verses which they had collected, they could have avoided the mistake which they have committed. Such a situation did not arise in the case of topical style of exegesis, which we now explain it.

Topical Style

The second style of the exegesis of the Qur'an is topical or unified style. In this style the verses of the Qur'an are not split, nor is each verse studied consecutively. In contrast the topical commentator concentrates his investigations on some particular subject of life, dealt with by the Qur'an, whether the subject is doctrinal, social or universal, and ascertains the views of the Qur'an about it. For example he may undertake the study of such subjects, as 'the doctrine of monotheism', 'trends of history' or 'how the sky and the earth have come into being'.

In the course of its studies topical exegesis tries to ascertain the viewpoint of the Qur'an so that the message of Islam in respect of the questions pertaining to life and the world may become clear.

Relation Between Topical Exegesis and Split Exegesis

It may be mentioned that the frontiers between these two types of exegesis, like any other work or historical event, are not definitely delineated. They often overlap each other, for in topical exegesis it is necessary to ascertain first from split exegesis the meanings of the words used

in the verses under study, before proceeding further. Similarly in the course of split exegesis we may come across some Qur'anic truth requiring deep study of a problem of life. In such a case exegesis tends to become topical.

Nevertheless, the two styles are independent of each other and each one of them has its own .purpose and a special import

Role of Tradition in Split Exegesis

One of the factors which gave impetus to split exegesis over many centuries is a tendency to make use of traditions and reports in the exegesis of the Qur'an. In fact, in the beginning exegesis was a part or a form of tradition (hadith), and was founded on it. Next to tradition come some linguistic, literary and historical information which has always been used for the purpose of exegesis.

That is why exegesis could never take a step forward beyond the limit fixed for it by the Holy Prophet and the infallible Imams through their companions and those who followed them. It never allowed itself to carry out any independent inquiry into the meanings of the Qur'an, or to compare various concepts or to derive any theories from the literal meanings of the verses.

In these circumstances exegesis has been confined to literal interpretation, explanation of single words, in the course of which a new terminology has been developed, and elucidation of certain verses by recounting the occasions of their revelation. This practice could not entail any constructive and progressive role, nor could it imply an idea besides the literal meaning. It .could not acquaint us with the basic ideas of the Qur'an dispersed in different verses of it

Topical Style of Traditions in Islamic Jurisprudence

In order to bring closer to the mind the conception of topical exegesis, we can explain the difference between these two styles of exegesis by referring to what we find in Islamic jurisprudence.

In one sense jurisprudence is an interpretation of what the Holy Prophet and the Infallible Imams have said or have done. We are aware of the books in which in the course of the discussion of the rules of law, traditions have been mentioned consecutively, each tradition having been quoted separately, and studied from the viewpoint of the implication of its language, its chain of transmitters or its text, or from all these angles, depending on the method followed by each book.

This is what has been done by the commentators of the Four Books (Usul Kafi, Tahzib, Istibsar

and Man La Yahzaruhul Faqih) and the commentator of the Wasa'ilush Shi'ah. But most of the books on Islamic law have not followed this method. They have divided juristic discussion according to the needs of life, and have quoted the relevant traditions under every question of law to derive and elucidate the Islamic point of view regarding it. This is the topical style in regard to the rules of law, and the style mentioned above was the split style in regard to the interpretation of juristic traditions. Now let us study the general style of the books of jurisprudence.

The juristic book al Jawahir is virtually a comprehensive commentary on the traditions contained in the Four Books. But this book does not explain each tradition separately. It has arranged the traditions according to the needs of life. The book has been arranged subject-wise and divided into chapters. There are, for example, chapters of sale, agreement, reclamation of barren land, marriage and so on. In these chapters the relevant traditions have been collected and explained, and then under each question of law the relevant traditions have been checked against each other and after taking all of them into due consideration, rules of law have been derived. It may be mentioned that it is not enough to know the meaning of a tradition, for no tradition in isolation can lead us to a rule of law.

We can arrive at a rule of law or a rule of life only after studying all the traditions which may possibly have any connection with the question under study. Similarly we can deduce a doctrine or a theory only after an extensive and thorough study of all the traditions on the subject. Nothing can be deduced from one single tradition.

This was the topical style of explaining the juristic traditions. By holding a comparison between the Qur'anic and the juristic studies you can find out the difference between topical and split styles of the exegesis of the Qur'an.

While topical style became popular in connection with juristic questions and was so developed that in the books of jurisprudence all rules of law are arranged in their appropriate chapters, a totally opposite trend developed in connection with the exegesis of the Qur'an. The style which dominated exegesis for about 13 centuries was split style. Every commentator of the Qur'an considered himself bound to explain the Qur'an verse by verse like his predecessors. The result was that topical style became the common and popular style in jurisprudence and split style in exegesis.

The studies which are confined to the occasions of revelation, abrogative and abrogated verses and the explanation of the words and the phrases used in their secondary meanings in the Qur'an, are in some cases known as topical exegesis. They should not be given this name. These studies are no more than a collection of certain subjects picked from split exegesis.

Hence they should not be called topical exegesis, which materializes only when we study a doctrinal, social or some other vital subject of life and evaluate it from the viewpoint of the Qur'an. It appears to be most likely that as much as topical style has helped in the advancement and expansion of juristic thought and inquiry, the split style of exegesis has caused stagnation of the Islamic thought in the Qur'anic field and has blocked its continuous progress; so much so that centuries have passed since the books of Tabari, Razi and Tusi were compiled but Islamic thought in the field of exegesis has not gone a step further than these books and nothing new has been added to Islamic research in this field.

During all this period exegesis has been static and in a state of immobility. It has taken no step forward except in some very insignificant cases. It remained static at a time when many changes were taking place in different fields of life. Hence by holding a comparison between the two above-mentioned styles we can explain why split style has been a factor of the stagnation of exegesis and why the topical style has been effective in the progress and expansion of the process of deduction of the rules of Islamic law. Then we can conceive clearly why one style has gained popularity while the other style became obsolete.

As it is necessary that our conception of these two styles should be clear and definite, some points of the difference between them are explained below:

Role of Topical Exegesis in the Development of Islamic Research

First of all we should know that the method, which is followed by a commentator in split exegesis, is mostly negative. He takes one or more interconnected verses without any prior planning and tries to interpret them in the light of the literal meaning of the text with the help of the general indications of its intendment. These indications may be internal or external. Anyhow, in all cases the commentator keeps his attention confined to the verse or the verses of the text and does not go a single step further.

We call this style negative, because in it the role of the commentator is just to listen to what the verses of the Qur'an say, though of course, with a clear mind, keen literary sense and good knowledge of grammar and figures of speech. The commentator, so to say, sits besides the Qur'an to listen to what it says. This position makes the role of the Qur'an active and that of the commentator passive or rather negative, for the Qur'an gives only as much as the commentator can take and assimilate. Consequently he records in his book only as much as he can understand from the meaning of the text.

But a topical commentator follows a different method. Before selecting a social or an ideological subject or a subject concerning life or the world he must concentrate enough

attention on that subject and in order to collect the necessary data study the ideas and experience of others. He must know the connected problems and their solutions as so far suggested by human thinking. He should be aware of the questions raised in connection with the subject (method of historical application) and any difference of opinion existing in regard to it. When equipped with this data he studies the Qur'anic verses, he is no longer a dull listener or a mere reporter. When he studies a problem in the light of the Qur'an, he deals with a vast amount of human ideas and extensive human studies. When he begins his study of the text of the Qur'an, he puts questions and the Qur'an answers.

The topical commentator, in the light of his data based on human efforts and studies tries to find out the viewpoint of the Qur'an in regard to his subject. He comprehends the opinion of the Qur'an by holding a comparison between the Qur'anic text and the data acquired by him from the ideas and views of others.

As such the results of topical exegesis are always consistent, well coordinated and concern the questions of human experience. These results show the signs of the limits fixed by the Qur'an in respect of that subject of human life. That is why we say that topical exegesis is a sort of a dialogue between the Qur'an and the commentator, and not a negative reaction to the Qur'an. Topical exegesis is an active and purposive work, as the result of which the Qur'anic text is used to throw light on some big truth of life.

In respect of the Qur'an Imam Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, says in one of his sermons: "Make the Qur'an speak to you. It will never speak, but I tell you that it is the knowledge of what is going to happen and what has happened in the past. It is the remedy of all your maladies. It regulates and coordinates your affairs." (Peak of Eloquence)

Imam Ali, the true son of the Qur'an has said: "Make the Qur'an to speak". This is the finest way of describing the task of topical exegesis, which has been described as a talk with the Qur'an and putting questions to it regarding every subject with a view to finding answers to them.

As such the basic difference between topical exegesis and split exegesis is the role of the commentator. In split exegesis his role is negative. He only listens and notes, whereas in topical exegesis, he must have an idea of the entire human heritage. He must have with him the ideas of his age so that he may put up to the Qur'an the outcome of human experience, so that the Qur'an, at which falsehood cannot come from before it or behind it, may express its opinion and the commentator may derive this opinion from all relevant verses put together, not from any isolated verse or verses.

Thus in topical exegesis the Qur'an and the reality combine together, for topical exegesis begins from reality and ends at the Qur'an. On the other hand, split exegesis begins from the

Qur'an and ends at the Qur'an. It has nothing to do with reality and life. In topical exegesis realities of life are put up to the Qur'an because it is our guardian, our patron and our refuge. Life must be led under its guidance.

That is why it is said that the Qur'an's power of guardianship and patronage permanently manifests itself. It is this quality of permanent guidance to which the traditions refer when they describe the Qur'an as inexhaustible. That is what the Qur'an itself has also said: The words of Allah could not be exhausted. (Surah Luqman, 31:27)

Indeed the divine truths are endless. The bounties of the Qur'an are unlimited, whereas the literal exegesis is limited and exhaustible, for nothing new can be added to the literal meanings. Even if some words acquire some new meanings, the Qur'an cannot be taken to signify them, for any new meanings or any new terminology which have emerged after the revelation of the Qur'an cannot represent the intention of the Qur'anic verses. Any term which has come into use since the revelation of the Qur'an has no connection with the Qur'an.

As such the inexhaustibility of the Qur'an can be established only through topical style of exegesis. This style proves that the Qur'an is a record of the past as well as of the future knowledge. It is a remedy of our ailments. In it we can find the basis for regulating our affairs. Through it we can know the celestial view about all terrestrial happenings.

As such topical exegesis is capable of rapid development, for human experience makes it blossom. When the Qur'an is studied in the light of human experience, new discoveries are made. That is the true way of understanding Islam.

Need of the Expansion of juristic Studies

We have already pointed out that since long juristic discussions have usually been arranged on topical basis, but in exegetic discussions the commentators have followed split style and expounded the Qur'an verse by verse from the beginning to the end. We do not mean to say that topical style being the usual practice in jurisprudence there is no longer any need of further topical investigations and studies in that field.

Our juristic discussions also must be expanded now. As regards topical discussions we require new research both horizontally and vertically, for as we have said topical method begins from the realities of life and ends at the rules of Islamic law. (Horizontal expansion in juristic discussion means the study of the questions and the rules of law which did not exist previously, but in modern life they have become a matter of daily requirement. The Shi'ah jurists call them `current issues'.

They have compiled special treatises to cover these questions and have issued them as

supplements to their main treatises. Such new questions include the questions of grafting limbs, plastic surgery, artificial insemination, prayers in polar regions and such transactions as insurance and dealings in value-bearing papers like cheques, drafts, bonds and company shares. Vertical expansion of topical method includes looking deep into the rules of Islamic law and discovering the values which the law-giver of Islam never consented to dispense with). It has always been the practice of our scholars and jurists to take their subjects of discussion from the realities of daily life and submit them to the judgement of Islamic law. Such daily transactions as offer of agreement, limited partnership, share-cropping of field and gardens have induced our jurists to deduce rules regarding them from the sources of Islamic law and state the provisions of law from divine point of view.

In fact, it must be recognized that topical style of jurisprudence also needs expansion. Over many centuries our scholars have continuously carried out their researches on the basis of topical style, and have deduced rules of law concerning every human need, but with the passage of time and complexity of civilization new dimensions have been added to human life. Hence it has become necessary that with the expansion of the needs of life, the topical juristic investigations should also expand.

This shows that although the investigation into juristic rules begins with concrete realities, yet it is to a large extent confined to the realities of the period of the late Shaykh Tusi or the late Muhaqqiq Hilli, while the realities of their lifetime could meet the needs of their time only, and not the needs of our time. For example, the transactions, such as leasing, sharecropping and partnership as mentioned in their books represent the market conditions of 800 or 1000 years ago, while the market conditions and the nature of transactions have changed today and economic relations have become complex.

Therefore jurisprudence today must follow the same course that it did follow during the time of the past scholars, when it showed reaction to every event and every condition of life. As rules relating to every situation that existed at that time were deduced from religion, the scholars of our time also must study the problems of today topically and deduce rules relating to them from the general principles of Islam so that jurisprudence may expand horizontally to the required degree.

Vertically also the same topical style of jurisprudence should be pursued so that juristic research may effectively expand. In other words it is essential that juristic question are deeply studied vertically and basic principles of jurisprudence are discovered. Tall buildings must be erected on juristic foundations. Elaborate laws should be framed reflecting the Islamic point of view, for as we know, every set of Islamic laws concerning every field of life is linked with basic

principles ensuring human development in the field of Islamic legislation. We find this principle clearly reflected in Islamic economy and the Islamic laws concerning marriage and divorce. For example, see the rules of Islamic law in respect of marriage and conjugal relations. They are linked with the role of man and woman in life as determined by Islam. Islamic views in this respect are basis and fundamental. On them the whole structure of the relevant law is based. It will be wrong to suppose that the rules of law are incoherent ideas of jurisprudence. They are not a literary miscellany. They should be regarded as a natural need and as far as humanly possible effort should be made to unravel their underlying idea and their rationale.

Need of Topical Exegesis

Now we revert to the points of difference between topical exegesis and split exegesis. We have already given some reasons why topical exegesis is preferable. As we have pointed out, the field of topical exegesis is vaster and more fruitful. It is more advanced than split exegesis. It can continuously make progress and make new discoveries, for this type of exegesis is based on human experience and as human experience advances, it becomes more fruitful.

In topical exegesis the accuracy of the data provided by human experience is checked against the Qur'an. That is the only way that enables us to find out the basic views of the Qur'an and Islam in regard to different subjects of life.

It may be said: What is the need of finding out these basic views of Islam? For example, what is the need of knowing the general theory of Islam about Prophethood? Is there any need of knowing what the Qur'an says about the trends of history? Or why would we interpret the social changes in the light of what the Qur'an says? Why should we know the Islamic law of economy?

Is there any reason why should we know what the Qur'an means by the words of sky and earth? What is the need of knowing the significance of these words and deducing theories relating to them. We know that the Holy Prophet himself refrained from describing any such theory in exact and definite terms. Generally speaking he has not mentioned any such theories. He only presented the Qur'an to the Muslims in its present form. Then why should we trouble ourselves to derive from it any separate theories?

In fact, today we feel a basic need of discovering these theories and cannot dispense with this need.

The Holy Prophet explained these theories in the context of the Qur'an in a way suited to his environment. He applied them on the whole to Islamic life. Now it is a duty of every Muslim to rediscover these theories within the ideological framework of that time. That framework was

natural, though it might be a little primitive. It is only the spiritual, social, intellectual and instructional framework prescribed by the Holy Prophet that can convey to us his ideas in a perfect form. It alone can evaluate every situation and every event of any time and can apply .what it says to all situations

If you compare between two common situations, this idea will be understood better:

Suppose a man is living among the people who speak a particular language. He wants to learn their language and its usage, and wants to know how their mind reaches from a word to its meaning and how they comprehend the exact meaning of a word. Now there are two ways of doing this.

One way is that he should mix up with the people of that society and fully participate in their activities. If he does that for some time, he will become familiar with the correct use of their language and as a result his mind will begin to move from the words to their meanings as required by that language and its usage. As this man lives among those who speak the language as their mother tongue, a hidden stock of the meanings will soon be deposited in his mind. As a word will be uttered he will draw upon that stock and understand the word correctly. As a result of his contact with those who speak the language as their mother tongue, he will get an insight into the language like them. In contrast a man who is not living in the society of those who speak the language -as their mother tongue, but wants to become conversant with its correct usages, has no alternative but to refer to its grammar and composition. He will have to acquire the ability of deriving its general rules. Take the case of Arabic language.

In the beginning the Arabs had to make no effort to learn it, for they lived in a predominantly Arab society. But later when their atmosphere changed and with the entry of other languages into their life, their own language became weak and mixed with a large number of foreign words, need was felt for the development of Arabic grammar and the theories of philology. As the atmosphere was no longer conducive to learning correct Arabic, it became necessary to study it in scientific lines. Theories were formed for consideration, discussion and criticism, so that the language may be moulded according to scientific rules and new theories. This was only an approximate example to explain our point.

The companions who lived along with the Holy Prophet might not have understood his views as general principles, but there is no doubt that they on the whole absorbed his ideas and were mentally impressed by them.

The general condition of the social, spiritual and mental framework in which they lived was helpful in understanding the Holy Prophet's teachings and creating an accurate standard for

the purpose of evaluating the things. But such a helpful atmosphere and appropriate conditions do not exist today. At a time when a need is being felt for the study of the views of the Qur'an in respect of the science of Islam, how can the general and universal theories in this respect be ignored?

During contacts between the Muslim world and the Western world expression is given to many divergent theories and points of view. Although the Muslims have vast treasures of intellectual resources and the Qur'an has provided them with a rich and varied source of learning in all branches of human knowledge, when there is a contact between a Muslim and a Westerner, the Muslim finds himself faced with so many theories which have emerged in different fields of life. Therefore it is a duty of the Muslims to know Islamic view vis-A~ -vis other theories. For this purpose they have no alternative but to go deep into the texts of Islam and find out Islam's stand in order to be able to understand how Islam has solved particular problems in a way commensurate with intelligent human experience in different fields of life.

Cooperation Between Topical and Split Styles

In this respect we have come to the conclusion that topical style is the best style of exegesis. But that does not mean that we are in favour of totally abandoning split style, for superiority of one style does not mean the abandonment or suppression of the other style. It only means that more attention should be paid to the better style, for topical exegesis is one step ahead of split exegesis. Split exegesis being the foundation on which topical exegesis is based, there is no sense in superseding it. All that we mean is that instead of one two steps should be taken, the first step being split exegesis and the second step, which is more advanced, being topical exegesis.